

# Christians, Muslims must 'put out fire' WCC's Kobia on cartoon controversy: WCC's Kobia on cartoon controversy

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Interfaith relations—and tensions—quickly took center stage at the opening of the World Council of Churches' ninth assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil, as Christian leaders grappled with Muslim rage over cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad.

Methodist minister Samuel Kobia, general secretary of the international ecumenical body with some 340 member churches and denominations in more than 100 countries, told a news conference that freedom of speech is a fundamental human right, but “when it is used to humiliate people’s values and dignity, it devalues the foundation it is based on.”

Kobia said Christians and Muslims must work together to “put out the fire” created by the publication in a Danish newspaper of 12 cartoons ridiculing Muhammad. They have since been republished in newspapers and on Web sites in Europe and the United States. Islam forbids depictions of the prophet on the grounds that they could lead to idolatry.

Protests across the Muslim world have turned violent in a number of places, including Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Pakistan, at least three people were killed by police February 15 as protests there entered their third day and demonstrators attempted to trash Western businesses.

Catholicos Aram I of the Armenian Apostolic Church, who is moderator of the WCC, also spoke to the issue. “In this small world we are living as one community,” he told the news conference. “Like it or not, we are neighbors; we are no longer strangers,” he said, adding that respecting diversity means respecting democratic values and “not imposing our traditions on our neighbors.”

The WCC has been a leader in promoting interfaith dialogue. The issue figures to be a main topic during the ten-day meeting.

Another sensitive interfaith issue—the fragile place of Christians in the Holy Land in the wake of Hamas’s victory in the parliamentary elections in the Palestinian territories—also was raised on the assembly’s opening day, February 14.

“The election is very confusing,” said Naim Ateek, an Anglican and director of Jerusalem’s Sabeel Institute, according to Ecumenical News International.

“Hopefully, pressure on Hamas to be responsible in government will help us create a stronger force for nonviolence.”

Ateek said that Christian churches must continue their economic campaign in opposition to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. The Sabeel Institute supports a “selective divestment” strategy. *-Religion News Service*